

# THE BOSTON INFORMER

No. 94

The newsletter for people who care about Boston

Spring 2010

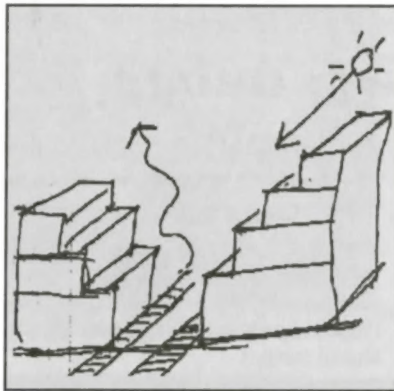
## Urban Design Primer

"Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work." Management pro Peter Drucker's admonition that the success of a plan is in the implementation can be applied to the City of Boston's current recession-period planning and urban design initiatives. The big ones—Stuart Street Corridor, Christian Science Center and the mis-named Greenway District Planning Study—are urban design plans ultimately linked to redevelopment opportunities rather than coordinated, comprehensive planning to advance social policy.

The evolution of urban design is key to understanding why certain urban design principles are king these days. The 1900s City Beautiful movement, with large-scale urban design goals, relied on the public sector to implement the civic vision with the private sector in tow. Planning and urban design from about 1915 until World War II shifted to reliance on regulation (zoning) to shape city form as developers built downtown. Finally, following social upheaval when highways and urban renewal wiped out neighborhoods, urban design guidelines—not comprehensive planning—took over as the main tools to ensure good urban form. Urban design plans tied to development plans are far more common now than Burnham's City Beautiful approach to downtown planning—broad, civic-centered plans undertaken primarily by the public sector.

Boston's recent urban design plans have different parameters, opportunities and constraints, but each is based on basic urban design principles that guide development design controls. Basic discussions in any urban design plan generally revolve around the size of proposed structures (height and floor-area ratio); setbacks; sun/shadow; context; percent open space; access; use and scale.

**Height:** A building's height can be visually reduced by modifying the scale of the facade (windows, materials) and by having the upper



Setbacks were conceived to ensure light and air reached the lower levels.

building levels set back from the base building mass. The Prudential and Hancock buildings have similar heights, but the pedestrian response is quite different. It is said that the first 30 feet of a building are the most important. However, in the skyline, height does make a difference and will establish a point of reference beyond the city. Note: Zoning height limits do not include the height above the highest ceiling; i.e., mechanical spaces, roof/attic spaces, etc. Height may be

desirable to create an iconic building on the skyline, a monumental building or a "statement" reflecting an era, culture, corporation or person. By the way, it is estimated China will build 50,000 "skyscrapers" of 50+ stories—the equivalent of 10 Manhattans. Boston has two buildings over 50 stories, and the proposed 1,000-foot tower appears dead.

**FAR (floor-area ratio):** How intensively a parcel is developed.

For example, a 40,000-s.f. parcel with allowable FAR of 15 could have 600,000 s.f. of interior spaces (excludes mechanical space, etc.). Theaters, arenas, convention centers=low FAR; residential and offices=high FAR.

**Setbacks:** In addition to regulating use, one of the original

purposes of zoning was to protect light and air at the lower floors. The landmark 1916 New York City Building Zoning Ordinance required building setbacks after a certain height. Artificial light and ventilation made the original intent of setbacks obsolete, and Boston has several examples of "negative setbacks" with upper levels extending over lower levels (Center Plaza arcade, 116 Huntington Ave., First National Bank).

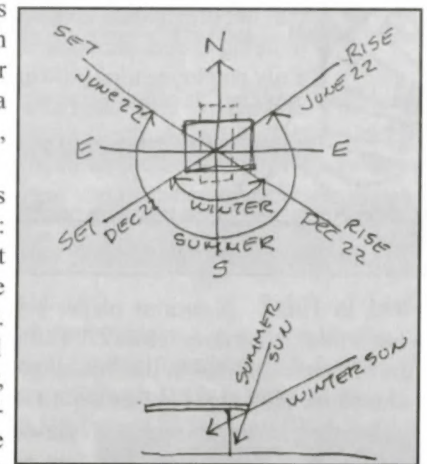
**Sun and shadow:** Objects cast shadows. Remember: the sun rises in the east and casts a shadow on the northerly side of an object. June 21 and December 21 are most extreme. Together, the height and mass will affect the sun/shadow on the ground plane and on other structures to the north of the building. Consequently, tall buildings on Huntington Avenue will not impact buildings in the St. Botolph Street area. Further, street width acts as a palliative in reducing shadows. The So. Boston Seaport District master plan calls for large avenues in part to reduce shadow impacts of the large building masses.

Relying on urban design guidelines to protect the form of the city requires making sure decision makers give urban design considerations different weight depending on the context. Shadows and height may not be major issues in some case and in other cases should be scrutinized. And is it better to have a non-compliant (taller, denser, etc.) beautiful object or a conformed small, less dense "ugly" building?

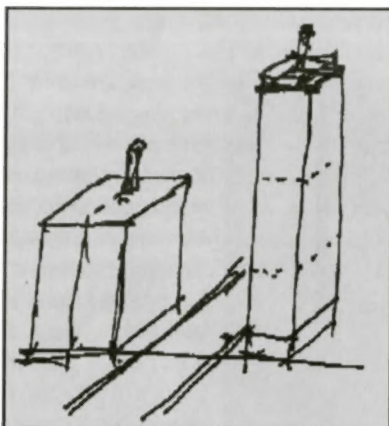
### According to Webster et al.

**Planning:** Works to improve long-term welfare of people and communities by creating convenient, equitable, healthful, efficient and attractive places. Planning helps communities envision the future in terms of the right balance of development and other values.

**Urban design:** The arrangement and design of buildings, spaces, transportation systems, services and amenities....The process of giving form, shape and character to groups of buildings, neighborhoods, and the city.



Solar diagram, Boston



Same floor-area ratio, different height.



## Armenian Heritage Park

Contrary to the report in The Boston Informer (No. 92, winter 2009/10), the Armenian Heritage Park is not under construction. The innovative and controversial park featuring a maze on Greenway Parcel 13, opposite the Marriott Long Wharf, is in final design and is expected to be advertised for construction this summer, with construction starting fall 2010. No completion date. The \$4 million park is primarily privately funded. Architect: Tellalian Associates.

## Liberty Mutual Proposal at 157 Berkeley St.

Liberty Mutual Group of Boston is proposing to build a 22-story, 291-foot-high office building at the former Salvation Army at Berkeley Street and Columbus Avenue. The site also includes a parking lot and former Benjamin Franklin Smith building on Columbus Avenue. About 205 auto parking spaces and 135 bike parking spaces are included.

The Stuart Street Planning Study identified shadow impacts as a potential site redevelopment issue, and the proposed project—lower than the Study suggested—would briefly cast a sliver shadow on Boston Common in December. Whether a 1990 law prohibiting new shadows on the Common would be violated is in dispute. The nondescript existing building and ugly parking lot on Columbus Avenue would be replaced with an active streetwall. A pedestrian bridge for Liberty Mutual use only would connect the existing building to the new building to accommodate the parade of approximately 2,770 daily employee trips (600 in peak) employees are expected to make (have they heard of e-mail?). Architect: CBT.



Proposed pedestrian bridge over Stuart Street connecting Liberty Mutual campus. Source CBT Architects.

## What's Up?

**What is this?** A curious reader provided this photo and asked, "What is this? What does it mean?" The shot is a photo of the remnants of the bike lane symbol in the Washington Silver Line bus lane. With no complementary signs indicating bikes are allowed in the bus lane,



these illegible pavement markings are no help. Installed by the City two years ago, maintenance seems non-existent. In fact, almost 65 percent of the bike lane symbols on the 1.5-mile route looked something like this.

There is little discussion of maintenance in the Mayor's Boston Bikes program. The City lacks

a bike plan to layout the components, priorities, and timeline for bike stuff, including commitments to maintenance.

**MBTA Washington Street Silver Line** — Ever since Silver Line riders on Washington Street in the South End got rained on while

waiting in the bus shelter, the shelters have been declared failures. Eight years after the Silver Line opened, the MBTA is planning to modify the shelters to add "laminated glass/polycarbonate windscreens" and overhead heating elements. In addition, the MBTA plans to better demarcate the busway using brown paint used on the Essex Street busway (by the way, this paint is wearing off after only nine months). Finally, limited pavement reconstruction in the busway where huge dips and bumps create hazards for bikes will be done.



Proposed MBTA Silver Line station improvements

This Federal Stimulus-funded project is expected to be done in 2010.

## MBTA Station Accessibility

The MBTA is moving ahead with station improvements to address accessibility barriers.

- **State**—elevators should be installed by the end of 2010, with only some punch list items remaining to complete station renovations in 2011.
- **Symphony**—the MBTA recently awarded the design contract to SEA Consultants. Estimated to take 18 months for design with construction done by 2014.
- **Hynes**—SEA consultants is also doing a feasibility study to see if there is actually room for elevators. No timeline.

## Boston Climate Action Initiatives

A year ago, Mayor Menino established the Boston Climate Action Leadership Committee to develop recommendations for policies and goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). The Committee, co-chaired by Jim Hunt of the City's Energy and Environmental Services Dept., included organizations from across the City.

Existing goals for energy reduction include the Mayor's 2007 order to reduce GHG by 80 percent by 2050 and the Commonwealth's Global Warming Solutions Act with a 2020 target of a 10 to 15 percent reduction. After a year of work that included broad outreach and five workshops attracting 500 people, the Committee issued its recommendations. Activities to reduce GHG emissions internally include changes to buildings, transportation and solid waste routines. Although it was said the Mayor adopted the plan in its entirety, policy changes, capital investments and incentive-based initiatives require participation by multiple agencies. In addition, commitment to measurement and enforcement requires systems and personnel, and typically this un-sexy task gets attention "later." Some of the recommendations:

- By mid-decade all buildings must meet minimum energy-efficiency standards before they are sold
- Accelerate bike share to the planned 3,000 bikes in Boston [see page 4]
- Stop giving away unlimited resident parking stickers. Charge fee for first sticker at an address and charge a lot more for more
- Establish mandatory recycling policy; that is, trash with recyclables mixed in will be left curbside
- By 2012 develop plan to retrofit all municipal buildings
- Establish curbside food waste pickup

The Committee recommended a City goal of reducing GHG emissions by at least 25 percent by 2020. The City's climate action plan update, due in December, will prioritize and identify responsible agencies to implement the recommendations. The Committee's report, Sparking Boston's Climate Revolution, is available online at [www.cityofboston.gov/Images\\_Documents/BCA\\_full\\_rprt\\_f2.pdf](http://www.cityofboston.gov/Images_Documents/BCA_full_rprt_f2.pdf).

## PEOPLE MOVERS

**John DeVillars**, former regional administrator of the U.S. EPA and former partner of Blue Wave Strategies consulting firm, to TRC Inc. in Lowell as senior vice-president for the renewable energy market.

**Nancy Stack**, formerly with Gilbane on the Harvard expansion in Allston, to Volpe National Transportation Systems Center.

**Terry Savage**, superintendent of the Boston National Historical Park and Boston African American National Historic Site, has retired.

**Cassius Cash** replaces Terry Savage at the National Park Service.

**Cathy Lynds**, from MassDOT Office of Transportation Planning and former legislative aide to Rep. Tom Cahir to MBTA general manager's chief of staff.

## Greenway District Study

The Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) in May issued a review draft of the 18-month planning study on the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway (see The Boston Informer, No. 90, July 2009). The BRA Board will eventually vote on the study. After approval the guidelines will be effective immediately to guide Article 80 review of proposed development over 50,000 s.f. More detailed guidelines will be used to develop zoning for this new neighborhood district in the Boston Zoning Code and to request amendments to the state Municipal Harbor Plan.

The study was "To create a set of guidelines specifically for the parcels adjacent to the Greenway" for:

- preserving the newly created open spaces environmentally, aesthetically and economically;
- activating the broader public realm in and surrounding the parks;
- ensuring the long-term value of the public's investment in the Greenway;
- balancing the development pressures in the Greenway District with other growth areas and opportunities in the city as a whole.

BRA worked with a team led by Utile on the study.

### "Activating the public realm"

HR and A Advisors, Inc. consultants concluded that reasonable development possibilities in the District would add only 2 million–3 million s.f. to the existing 22 million s.f., about a 12 percent increase in people living and working in the District. Visitors and more of the existing population using the Greenway would be needed to truly activate it.

### "Balancing development pressure"

The City has tens of millions of s.f. of development permitted and awaiting financing (e.g. Filene's site, Fan Pier, Back Bay, etc.). In a good year the City absorbs only about 1 million s.f., and the BRA regards the Seaport District as the next area for major development.

The final guidelines primarily address building height, although recommended densities were shown in interim reports. Shadow and wind studies informed the guidelines. Guidance on use is limited and no study of transportation impacts was done.

## Proposed Greenway District Height Guidelines

**North End:** 55 ft.; parcel 11B, 85 ft.

### Market District and Government Center:

Blackstone Block, 55 ft. to 85 ft.; Market parcel 9, 55 ft. Government Center Garage (three buildings), 125 ft. to 150 ft. at the Greenway, 400 ft. next to JFK Federal Building and 600 ft. farthest from the Greenway.

**Town Cove:** Fill-in sites adjacent to the Greenway, 130 ft.

### Wharf District:

All new buildings including Harbor Garage site, 200 ft. except the Hook Lobster site, 175 ft. Most of this district is also controlled by the Ch. 91 state law and the Municipal Harbor Plan, limiting heights to 155 ft. with 50 percent open space.

**Financial District:** 600-ft. limit, FAR 20.

**Dewey Square:** 350-ft. limit.

### Chinatown and Leather District:

Edinboro Street sites, 175 ft. Lincoln Street Garage site, 100-ft. maximum, 80 ft. at edges. Hudson Street sites, 125 ft. at Kneeland Street.



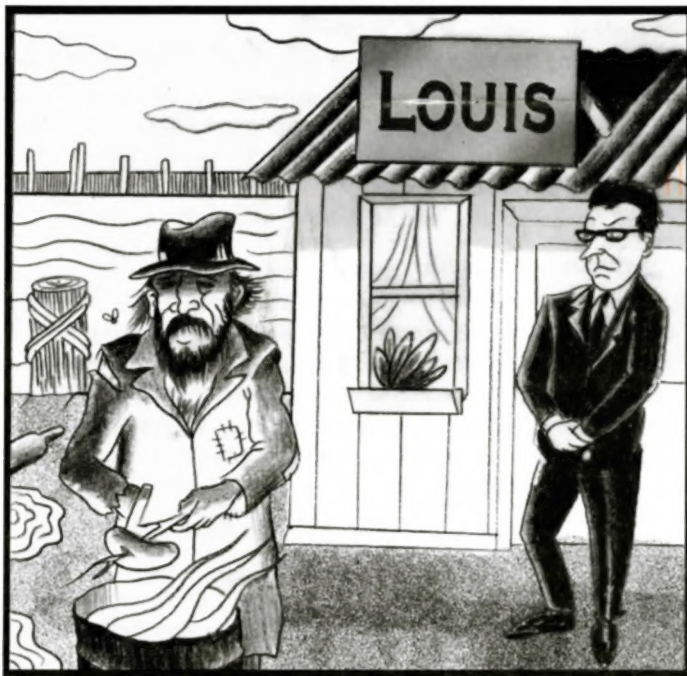
## Welcome to The Boston Informer

The goal is simple: Provide concise public information on construction projects, planning initiatives, and whatever else affects living and working in Boston. Welcome to The Boston Informer!

The Boston Informer is published by ATC Information, Inc., five times yearly in Boston, Massachusetts. President: Anthony Casendino; vice-presidents, Anne McKinnon, Chris Fincham.

The Boston Informer is available by mail only. \$25.00 per year (cheap!). Questions? Telephone (617) 723-7030, fax (617) 437-1886 or e-mail: [BostonInformer@cs.com](mailto:BostonInformer@cs.com). Check us out on the Web at [www.bostoninformer.com](http://www.bostoninformer.com)!

*Louis moves from Back Bay to the last frontier; Fan Pier, and is housed in a 'temporary' building.*



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**New recession 'waterfront couture' line to be featured at a trunk show soon!**

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**TIME TO RENEW**

7/1/10  
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## You Were Asking

- Q. I heard a Back Bay group declined to support the BRA's application to the American Planning Association for its "Great Places in America" program. What is going on?**
- A.** APA's 2011 annual conference will be at the Hynes (not the So. Boston Convention Center—not many good case studies in planning there). BRA nominated Back Bay as a "Great Place," but the Neighborhood Assn. of the Back Bay opposed the BRA's bid. NABB objected to the BRA's lack of consultation and its broad boundaries for what it calls Back Bay. Swipes at the BRA's development review process were included in the letter to the Mass. APA chapter head. Ouch.
- Q. I thought the ramps along the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway were supposed to be covered.**
- A.** Parcel 18 (opposite Rowes Wharf) was originally to be open space and was later designated for the Center for the Arts and Culture, now dead. Parcel 12, which at one point was designated for the Boston Museum Projects (no longer), remains vacant and may become a tree farm. Parcel 6, designated for the YMCA, is still possible. Regardless, the state is committed to covering the ramps.
- Q. When is the bike share program beginning?**
- A.** A Federal Transit Administration \$3 million grant is partially solving the significant funding issues for the regional bike rental program. The program will help bridge the "last mile" from transit station to workplace with 500 bikes. Funding is still needed to expand the program to 3,000–5,000 bikes to thoroughly cover Cambridge and Brookline destinations and reach a critical mass. Ads at the bike stations will generate operating revenue, but restrictions and concerns about ads and bikes in Boston parks could limit bike stations in high-demand locations.
- Q. What is happening with the long-awaited supermarket planned for the Bulfinch Triangle at North Station?**
- A.** Alas—it is still long-awaited. MassDOT has issued a default notice to the original developer of the former MassPike parcel, Hines Raymond LP, and is looking for a new developer.

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